

Don't Make Me Put 'Em Up by FrazzledSquidz

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Summary:

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Nancy was so beautiful. Even wearing nothing but a stormy look on her face, she took his breath away. “That’s what you used to say about Jonathan, too, remember?”

Don't Make Me Put 'Em Up

Author's Note:

*Don't make me put 'em up, don't make me put 'em up,
You won't like me
Don't make me put 'em up, don't make me put 'em up,
It's not like me.*
by PRIORY

Steve jerked awake with a startled gasp as a loud knocking and a call of “Jonathan!” came through the door, the other bodies in the bed startling as well.

“Oh fuck,” he heard Jonathan breathe. Steve glanced over as the other boy extricated himself from under Nancy’s arm, calling out, “Sorry, mom! I’m coming!”

As Jonathan dashed around the room grabbing underwear, jeans, and a sweatshirt, Steve rubbed his eyes and looked over at Nancy, who was frowning blearily at the door.

“Jonathan!” Joyce’s voice came through the door, sounding exasperated. “You know my car broke down and I was depending on you for a ride today! And Will is up and ready to go to Mike’s but breakfast hasn’t been made-”

“Mom, I know! I’m sorry!” Without even a backwards glance at the two on his bed, Jonathan opened his bedroom door just wide enough to slip through and disappeared.

Steve met Nancy’s eyes and she rolled over on her side to face him, their unhappy looks identical as the loud voices continued to trickle through the walls. The two of them had snuck into Jonathan’s room last night, as he’d had to work all day yesterday. Steve vaguely remembered Jonathan telling them that he had to get up early, but Steve had been too preoccupied getting his hands down Jonathan’s pants and his teeth around his collarbone to pay it much mind.

It hadn’t, originally, been his and Nancy’s intention to spend the

night at Jonathan's since his mom and brother were home, but once they were all sleepy and happy and warm together it was difficult to remember the practical reasons to leave.

Steve's gaze fixed on a point over Nancy's bare shoulder as he listened to the commotion continue outside of their little sanctuary. He could make out some words, but not enough. It was strange to hear- his house was always quiet. Even when he and his parents were under the same roof they barely spoke. His dad rarely deigned to say anything to him and his mom, who he did usually get along with, was too busy chasing after his dad to pay much attention to her independent son.

Steve heard the front door open and close, the sound of Joyce's voice leaking through the cracked window. "Will, come on! Jonathan, sweetheart, you know I'm not mad at you, I just wish that you'd keep-" but a closing car door cut off the rest of her sentence for him.

Nancy sat up as two other car doors closed and they heard it pull away, her face still creased in unhappiness.

"Man," Steve sighed, stretching his arms above his head. "Joyce Byers is a trip. Way to ruin a Saturday morning."

Nancy sighed, pushing her tangled hair over her shoulders. "I feel like it's our fault. Jonathan told us he had to get up early and we kept him up anyway."

"He's a big boy, Nance," Steve mumbled, rubbing his eyes again. "He knows how to set an alarm clock."

"Well, yes, but we could've reminded him."

Hearing the irritation in her voice, Steve sat up, watching her get out of bed. "Wait, are we fighting about this? This isn't *our* fault, babe. His mom is a freak."

Nancy was so beautiful. Even wearing nothing but a stormy look on her face, she took his breath away. "That's what you used to say about Jonathan, too, remember?"

Steve groaned loudly and also got out of bed, trying to ignore the

spike of hurt and regret at the reminder. “They are nothing alike. Anyway, why would she yell at him like that?”

Nancy had pulled on her underwear and bra, and now was looking for her dress. She was breathing slowly and deeply, and Steve knew she was trying to control her anger. “They’re very alike. And she was upset. She’ll probably be late to work today because he wasn’t up on time.”

Steve grabbed his jeans, his boxers still inside, and pulled them on. He found his shirt hanging over the desk chair and shrugged into it with a sigh. “Fine, but still. It’s not like that’s all his fault. Why should he have to be responsible for that crap? He’s just a kid.” Sometimes that’s what Steve’s mom said, a gentle hand on the side of his face and a smile in her eyes as she reminded him how young he was and how much fun he should have before he became an adult. This was usually after his dad had started braying something about “adulthood” and “responsibilities” and “direction” at him.

Nancy’s dress fell over her body with a whisper. When she faced him Steve was stunned to see that her eyes were shining with tears. “Everyone in a family has a responsibility, Steve. Jonathan’s dad left, remember? Someone has to pick up the slack.”

Steve struggled, confused as to why she was so upset and why they were even fighting over the Byers’ family dynamics. “Okay, I understand that, but why not his mom? She could get a better job and move them out of this shithole, at least.”

“This is their *home!*” she yelled. “Can you imagine how hard it is for someone like Joyce Byers to get a good enough job to support two boys?”

Steve could honestly say that he’d never thought about it. “Your dad supports your mom and three kids! Why is that any different?”

“It just is! He went to college to get a good job and my grandparents were able to support him because they had a lot of money. Also it’s just something he has to do! Joyce probably grew up never expecting to have to support her whole family, without the help of anyone else! She’s been working at that supermarket down the street for, what,

ten years and still isn't a manager or anything? That's bullshit! And it's not like any money that Jonathan makes could support the house."

"Okay, I get it." Kind of. "But, again, she shouldn't put that much pressure on Jonathan. She's the parent, not him."

"Steve..." Nancy looked at him like he was dense. He probably was. "Some people don't have a choice. Jonathan helps out because that's all he can do. His mom is obviously not completely well and someone has to pick up the slack. While we get to do whatever we want Jonathan has to work and watch Will and probably a million other things that we don't even know about."

Steve ran his hands through his hair in frustration, feeling helpless. "Fine. But I wish we could *do* something, you know? Like help him out when he needs it or give them a lot of money or something. It's not fair."

Nancy sighed and moved away. "I feel bad for them, too. He deserves better than *this*." Which was what Jonathan heard clearly as she opened the door to find him standing on the other side.

Steve had rounded the bed to follow her out, but stopped dead when he saw Jonathan in the doorway and the cold fury in his eyes.

They stood awkwardly for a moment, Jonathan glaring at the floor, before he mumbled, "You guys should go. Now."

Nancy took a deep breath, gripping the doorknob tightly. "No. We're not leaving you."

His fists clenched and he turned on one heel, heading quickly to the back of the house.

Do not let him go, whispered a voice in the back of Steve's mind urgently. Tripping over some of the mess on the floor, he pushed past Nancy and followed Jonathan out of the house and into the woods, dead leaves crunching underneath his bare feet. "Byers!"

"Go away, Steve!" Jonathan's voice shook almost as much as his shoulders; Steve could see how tightly wound he was even from five

feet behind him. He recognized the view, unfortunately.

“Hey!” He caught up to Jonathan and grabbed his elbow and was subsequently knocked flat by the punch that caught his jaw.

“Is that all you think we are?” Steve heard Jonathan yell as his brain caught up to the fact that he’d bitten his tongue and was staring up at the sky, his breath gone.

“No, Jonathan!” He heard Nancy come up, glancing down at Steve momentarily before looking up at the other boy. He sat up slowly, feeling his jaw throb, absently marveling at how these two could always surprise him.

“Some poor, sad, freakish family?” Jonathan continued ruthlessly. “Too poor to have a fancy house and so depressing they deserve your pity? You’re the ones I feel sorry for, stuck in your empty houses with your dead-eyed parents who lacked the backbone to do anything original with their lives! I’m not sorry we don’t live our upper-middle class delusion of the world. But also, did you know, some people scrimp and save and still never get ahead because it’s *never* enough!”

“I know,” Nancy replied earnestly, voice sounding watery as Steve staggered to his feet, wiping the blood from the corner of his mouth.

“Do you?” Jonathan demanded. “You two go out and do whatever you want whenever you want. Either your family isn’t home or you lie to them constantly. I’m not saying we’re perfect, but at least my mom knows I’ll always be around! And she literally moved Heaven and Earth to get Will back when he was taken!” Now Jonathan’s eyes were wet, too, blinking furiously behind the fall of his bangs. His voice was trembling and Steve wanted so badly to do *anything* to make it stop.

“She tries her hardest *every single day*. She always has, even when my worthless dad *was* around. She tries so hard to give me and Will a good life while I run around and,” he gestured at Steve and Nancy, voice growing quiet and resigned, “mess around with you guys. Wasting money on camera film and throwing away hours I could be working and helping. Not being home with them when I could be,

even after we almost lost each other.” He sighed and his whole body slumped, like he was a puppet whose strings had been cut. “Well not anymore. It’s over. We’re over. I’m... I’m done.”

Through the panic that shot through him like lightning, through the devastating sound of Nancy’s ragged sob, and through the sight of Jonathan Byers without any hope at all, Steve had a flash of insight.

“Wait!” He stepped forward, trying to just *pause* the world for a minute. Two pairs of eyes gazed at him, hopeful and hopeless. “Wait,” Steve repeated, finding his hands outstretched like he was trying to calm wild animals. “I fucked something up. I’m not quite sure how, but I know I did. I also think that we’re fighting about different things here.” He glanced at Nancy, who was wiping her eyes, then at Jonathan, who looked like his heart was cracking open inside his chest right before he trained his gaze on the ground. “Can we just... go back to bed? Let’s just go back to where everything was amazing and we were great and we’ll talk, okay?” In a bed, they knew each other inside and out and things were quieter, safer. “We’ll just talk.”

When no one protested, Steve grabbed Nancy’s hand and pulled her gently forward so he could also take Jonathan’s. It twitched in his grasp and for one terrifying second Steve thought he was going to pull away, but in the end he relaxed. Walking between them, Steve quietly guided them back through the woods, the back door, and the house to a place where everything had been perfect just a few hours ago.

Steve gently pushed them towards the bed so he could shut and lock the door, even though no one else was home. It helped with the feeling of safety and privacy. Nancy sat up against the headboard, blankets pulled into her lap, while Jonathan sat a little ways away, sleeves covering his hands and hair in his eyes. Steve sat cross-legged on top of the covers, completing their little circle.

Okay, now what? He thought frantically. They had to go back somehow, back to that moment where they were all curled up together, warm and happy. “What was up with this morning?” He decided to ask Jonathan, trying to keep his voice calm and nonjudgmental.

The other boy shrugged, staring down at his lap. All the fight seemed to have gone out of him, as quickly as it had reared its ugly head. “You heard. I messed up.”

Silence fell again. *God this is hard!* Steve tried to think back to a few years ago, when he’d been mandated to see the school counselor once a week for anger management. What would she say in this kind of situation?

“How?” Steve prodded, trying to keep Jonathan talking and hoping he wasn’t fucking things up further.

Jonathan sighed, looking up but around the room, instead of at them. Steve’s chest ached when he realized that Jonathan’s eyes were wet. “My mom’s car broke down. I had to give her a ride to work. I wasn’t up in time.” He paused. “I’m always the first one up. I wake Will and we make breakfast, and then we all eat together. That didn’t happen today. I overslept and forgot my alarm. I messed up.” He paused again, but Steve knew something else was coming. He held his silence and, sure enough, after a few long moments, Jonathan sighed and murmured, “Nobody got breakfast today because of me.”

“Oh, Jonathan,” Nancy whispered. “We’re so sorry.”

Jonathan shook his head, resolutely staring at the window, even though the blinds were down. “It’s not your fault, really. But... I’ve been slacking off lately. Sleeping in because I’m out too late, spending too much money on stuff, not picking up a lot of shifts... You guys are important to me, but so is my family. I have a responsibility to them.”

Steve was *unbearably close* to offering to just buy all of Jonathan’s camera supplies and groceries and everything for him, but he knew the offer would be seen as condescending instead of helpful. It was infuriating. He understood pride, of course he did, but also it sucked.

“Jonathan...” Nancy started softly, tucking her hair behind her ears. “Of course I understand how important they are to you and how much they need you. But you deserve to have fun and be happy, too.”

Jonathan shook his head, looking pained. “Don’t you get it? That was

my dad's reason. We were tying him down, he was too young, he wanted to go to the city to get a good job and meet people and live a full life... He wanted to have *fun*."

"But, dude." Steve couldn't stay quiet a minute longer. "You're not your dad; you're not even *a* dad. You're not talking about splitting town, just, you know, chilling with two of the hottest people around every now and then."

A reluctant smile tugged at Jonathan's mouth at the last part, but he still wasn't looking at them.

"You do so much for your family," Nancy offered quietly, resting a hand on the bed between their knees. "Way more than anyone else I know."

Jonathan's gaze dropped to her hand, at what he knew it was offering, desperation edging his features. "But I could be doing more."

"We all could." Steve shrugged. "But, you know, all that shit will always be there. All your life you'll be cooking breakfasts and spending money on stuff and putting other people before yourself because that's just who you are." Finally, finally Jonathan's eyes met his. "But you'll only be young enough to have five orgasms in one night for so long, right?"

Jonathan rolled his eyes outrageously, but couldn't keep the small smile from his face. "That has never happened. Also you only ever think about sex."

"Well then challenge accepted. And I've got you two in a bed- what the hell else am I supposed to be thinking about?"

Nancy smiled at Steve, that kind of secret knowing smile that made his heart dip into his stomach, before she looked back at Jonathan. "If you don't want to be with us anymore, or just want to take a break, or whatever, we understand." Resigned sorrow settled back over Jonathan's features. "But I think you do want to be with us. And you know we want to be with you. Why not let us help you out a little where we can? What's the point in breaking social convention

and having two partners if we can't shoulder some of the burden?"

"Totally!" Steve scooted closer in excitement. "I mean, I burn water, but you know I'm a great driver. I'll take your mom all over town!"

"Steve." Jonathan looked at him earnestly, finally taking Nancy's hand and making her light up beside him. "I don't know how to tell you this, but you're a terrible driver and you would absolutely kill my mom."

Steve's mouth dropped open as Nancy let out a bark of laughter, free hand flying up to cover her mouth. "How dare you spread such slander in front of our girlfriend, Jonathan Byers!"

"Man, she *knows*. She's been suffering your driving for longer than I have. You also need divine intervention regarding your mixtapes."

"Just because you're obsessed."

"No!" Nancy interrupted, smiling around her groan. She pushed the covers off her legs and moved to drop herself in Jonathan's lap sideways, looping her arms around his shoulders. "You guys always have the same arguments when it comes to music. It's boring."

"Nancy Wheeler, everyone." Steve gestured grandly. "The only girl alive bored with *two* boyfriends." He and Jonathan shared a fond smile, Jonathan's left hand dropping over and covering her bony knees.

"That's right," she declared happily, nuzzling her face into Jonathan's neck. "I'm incorrigible and you two are stuck with me."

"I can think of worse things," Jonathan mused.

"I can't," Steve joked. "She's gonna eat us alive, man." He was so happy to be back on familiar, happy ground. "Listen, why don't we actually get permission from your mom to sleep here tonight and we can help you cook up a feast in the morning?"

Jonathan was looking tentatively happy at the idea, but Nancy had stilled and her features had grown heavy. "I... I can't. Not Sunday mornings."

"How come?" Jonathan asked quietly, gently shaking her knees.

She sighed and picked up her head, glancing at Steve. "I've been... I've been driving Barb's family to church every Sunday."

There was a brief, puzzled pause as they took in the meaning and enormity of that statement. *Everyone in a family has a responsibility, Steve!* she had yelled at him earlier. God how could he love her so much and still miss things so important?

"That was something she used to do?" Jonathan asked quietly, watching her.

Nancy nodded, keeping her face carefully blank. "Her grandpa used to drive all of them. He died right around the time that she learned to drive, so she took up the job. She was so happy about it... She felt like she had been trusted to do something important, driving her parents and grandma to church every week without them having to ask. It was their little tradition."

A few tears escaped and she wiped them away brusquely. Steve ached to think how much practice she had in dealing with her sorrow and pain on her own.

"That's so nice," Jonathan said encouragingly, smiling. "I can't imagine how happy that makes them."

Nancy gave him a watery smile in return. "Really? I hope so. They... they never asked me to, I just kind of showed up one Sunday and they went along with it. Her mom is starting to talk a little again. God they- they still think someone took her. They don't believe Hopper when he tells them she's gone."

Jonathan rubbed her knee, trying to be comforting. "I think it's just impossible for some moms to lose their kids."

Steve knew they were all thinking about Joyce in that moment. "What about after?" he offered. "You come back here and join us for breakfast?" Considering he hadn't known, for *months*, that Nancy took Barb's folks to church every week, he hated to think of what she normally did afterwards.

Nancy smiled, features relaxing. “That sounds nice.” She glanced over at Jonathan. “As long as your mom is okay with it?”

He nodded quickly. “Are you kidding? She’ll be ecstatic, not only that I have friends but that they want to hang out over here.”

Steve grinned and stretched out on the bed, happy that Jonathan had switched from trying to close his life off from them to inviting them in further. He couldn’t have been more pleased by the outcome. “If you didn’t hate everyone you might have more friends,” he stated easily.

“But people are the worst,” Jonathan protested indignantly.

“Even us?” Nancy grinned and switched from his lap to stretch out along Steve’s side, laying her head on his chest and cuddling up to him happily.

“Especially you two,” he mumbled, unable to keep the smile from his face as he stared down at them. Looking suddenly determined, Jonathan also moved, spooning Nancy and pressing her into Steve as he reached around, gently cupping Steve’s jaw. “I’m sorry I hit you.”

Steve blinked, suddenly tuning into the throb of his jaw. He had completely forgotten about it. “It’s okay. I deserved it.”

Jonathan frowned fiercely. “No, you didn’t. I was wrong. I also shouldn’t have said those things about you guys.”

“It’s okay,” Nancy stated quietly, turning her head enough to look over at him. “I think we all said things we didn’t mean.”

Steve knew that, deep down, Jonathan *had* meant those things about the middle class and all that, but he honestly didn’t care. “You should kiss it better, Byers. Since you feel so bad.”

Jonathan rolled his eyes again, but pushed himself up to lean over Nancy, who giggled as she was sandwiched more firmly between the two boys. He brushed a kiss over the ache on Steve’s jaw, so light he could barely feel it. Jonathan drew back and stared into Steve’s eyes seriously. “I really am sorry.”

He smiled gently, reaching up and pushing Jonathan's messy hair back from his forehead. "I know, it's okay. I'm sorry, too."

Jonathan sighed and fell back to spoon Nancy, arm stretching out over her and to curl around Steve's hip. Nancy's arm was bent up on Steve's chest, her fingertips just barely brushing his throat, and Steve's was stretched out so Jonathan could pillow his head on it. Everything felt safe, comfortable, and easy once again.

I would do anything to keep it this way, Steve realized, staring up at the ceiling. He felt dizzyingly devoted to both of them, but also to what they had created together.

With other girls that he had dated, he'd always felt a brief surge of protectiveness and adoration that, within a month, tended to dissipate as suddenly as it had taken hold of him. Steve had wondered, once he'd started obsessing over him and Nancy with Jonathan, if that feeling would also vanish once they had actually gotten together.

Instead, it seemed to be growing stronger. Steve had been so afraid when they were fighting, terrified of losing what was easily the best thing in his life. He honestly hadn't cared that Jonathan had hit him, because it had meant that the other boy was too angry to just give up on him yet. He had seen the way Jonathan shut down during fights or arguments with others, easily giving up the ghost because it didn't seem worth the effort. He could have easily done that this morning with Steve and Nancy, but instead he engaged; he lashed out and fought back and tried to draw away, but also let them pull him in closer in the end.

Steve glanced down at the top of Nancy's head against his chest, her breathing slow and even. He wished that he had known about the church thing earlier. Why had she hid it from them? Maybe because she herself wasn't sure what it meant or how long it would last? Steve wished she had told them, though. She always talked about Jonathan carrying so much baggage but she was the one dealing with the death of her best friend alone.

Maybe this is just her way of dealing with it, he mused, bringing his free hand up to cover hers on his sternum. Steve knew it wasn't always

easy to talk about things, especially heavy awful things, but he hoped that she made the effort later. Maybe he could figure out how to bring it up without upsetting her, just let her know that he would listen whenever she needed to talk about Barb. He'd never had someone he had cared about like that but... if he suddenly lost Nancy or Jonathan he was sure he wouldn't handle it well. Just look how he'd reacted when he'd thought Nancy had cheated on him all those months ago.

Well that all wound up working out okay. He mused. *Except for the whole monster thing. That kinda sucked.*

"Steve," Jonathan grumbled warningly. He suddenly noticed he had been wagging his foot as his mind churned.

"Sorry, sorry," he whispered, stilling. Jonathan squeezed his hip briefly, and Steve relaxed further. He closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, trying to let his mind drift into serenity after the adrenaline from this morning. Everything was fine and they were all still together.

The rest would work itself out, he was sure of it.

Author's Note:

I wrote this from Steve's POV because he's the most challenging for me. I hope I did him justice!